

## History of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew sits on the banks of the River Thames between Richmond and Kew in south-west London. Today, the Gardens extend over 121 hectares (300 acres) and include an extensive arboretum, water features, herbaceous borders, a rock garden, conservation area and some of the world's largest and most famous glasshouses, as well as many other historically important buildings. The Gardens are unique in many ways, but they have not always looked as they do today.



Augusta, Princess of Wales

The importance of this area in history stretches back 2,000 years – it was here that Julius Caesar crossed the Thames with his Roman army to claim his invasion of Britain. Royalty first came to Kew in the early Middle Ages. Edward III created the first palace (from a manor house) at Richmond in the early 14th century. Later, Henry VII built Richmond Palace next to the Thames; and James I chose to hunt here and built a lodge near the river. The royal court came to favour this area as a summer retreat from the city.

### Who started Kew?

There has been a garden at Kew since at least the early 17th century. In the 1660s, Henry Capel lived at Kew Park, near where Kew Palace stands today. In 1718 the heir to the throne came to live at Richmond Lodge – now a

much altered version of James I's hunting lodge. Prince George, with his wife Caroline, developed a garden and landscape park next to the river. In 1727 they were crowned George II and Queen Caroline. In the early 1730s their son Frederick, now Prince of Wales, bought Kew House and began to lease lands to establish an estate that ran parallel to his parents' grounds. These two estates are the basis of Kew today and are the reason why Kew is still known as the 'Gardens' (plural).

Queen Caroline hired Charles Bridgeman and William Kent – the fathers of the English Landscape Movement – to transform her Richmond estate into the latest naturalistic fashion. There were groves of trees, water features, a canal garden, many different follies, and a riverside walk famously known as the Terrace.

Prince Frederick was an avid gardener and while he appreciated the Landscape Movement, he also wanted to create a botanical collection. Having transformed Kew House into a new palace known as the White House with the help of William Kent, he set about transforming his garden to include a large lake, follies, and the planting of many hundreds of interesting trees. Frederick died in 1751 as he was just starting a big new plan, about which we know little. His widow Princess Augusta decided to carry on his ideas. She founded a botanic garden in 1759 on nine acres of land east of the White House and created a landscape garden that was the envy of many, with advice from her gardener William Aiton, her botanical adviser Lord Bute, and architect Sir William Chambers.

## Who collected all of the plants?

George III, son of Frederick and Augusta, inherited both the Kew and Richmond estates and merged them in 1802. Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was employed to redesign the Richmond garden and swept away many of Caroline's follies and features.

Impressed by the adventures and scientific knowledge of Sir Joseph Banks, George III handed over unofficial charge of the Gardens to him. The subsequent fame of the Gardens is largely down to Banks' vision. Under his direction collectors travelled all over the world in search of plants of economic, scientific or horticultural interest and Kew became a centre for botanical study. Discovery and collection of plants continues to this day, to support their conservation and sustainable use.

## The growth of the Gardens

When both George III and Joseph Banks died in 1820, the Gardens fell into decline and in 1840 they were adopted by the nation. In 1841 Sir William Hooker was appointed the

first official Director of the Gardens. He established the Museums and Department of Economic Botany (1847), the Herbarium and Library (1852), the Palm House (1848) and started building the Temperate House (1859-), turning a neglected landscape into a botanical garden of international importance.

Sir William's son and successor, Sir Joseph Hooker, oversaw the founding of the Jodrell Laboratory in 1876. In 1882, the Marianne North Gallery was donated to the Gardens and in 1898 Queen Charlotte's Cottage and its grounds were donated by Queen Victoria to commemorate her Diamond Jubilee of 1897. In 1904, Cambridge Cottage and its garden, now the home of the Kew Gardens Gallery, were presented by Edward VII on the death of the last Duke of Cambridge, and the Gardens reached their present size of 121 hectares.

## Lost and found

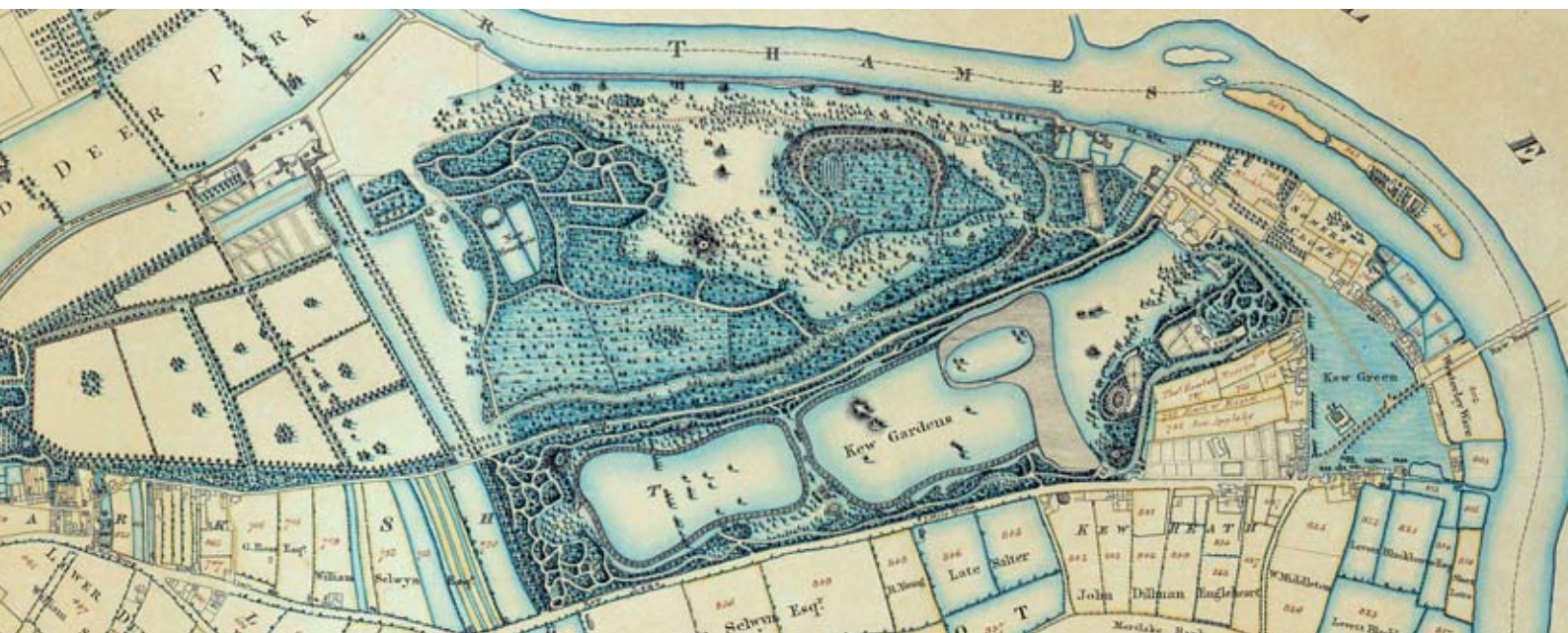
There are 39 buildings and structures at Kew of historic importance, recognised by English Heritage Grade I and II listing. Some have survived from the time of Princess Augusta, including the Pagoda (1762), the Temple of Bellona (1760), and the Orangery (1761). However many of

the original buildings were lost over time; some, like the Temple of Victory (1759), which stood where the Flag Pole stands today, were actually only insubstantial lath-and-plaster structures built in a very short space of time. Others, including Merlin's Cave (1735) and the Dairy (1720s), were swept away due to changing fashions.

New buildings have taken their place, as the landscape constantly evolves at Kew. The Australian House (1952) became the Evolution House in 1994; the Princess of Wales Conservatory was opened in 1987; the Sir Joseph Banks Building in 1990; and the Sackler Crossing and the Davies Alpine House in 2006.

Kew has also expanded: Wakehurst Place, in Sussex, was leased from the National Trust in 1965. The cooler, moister environment on this estate complements that at Kew and greatly increases the range of plants that can be cultivated. Kew extended the estate by buying land on which to found the Millennium Seed Bank, which opened in 2000.

In 2003, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew was awarded World Heritage Site status by UNESCO, in recognition of its unique history.



1771 plan showing the two royal gardens